

Call for Submissions

Issue #34/35 of *Border/Lines* (our tenth anniversary issue) will explore the emergence in the past few years both of religious fundamentalism and of ethnic purity, particularly in Asia, Europe and Africa. The situation in the former Yugoslavia, the rise of Zhirinovskiy in Russia, the Hindu fundamentalists in India, the religious/ethnic confrontations in Nigeria and South Africa are all indications of responses to what Western social theorists like to call globalization. *Border/Lines* would like to examine the issues as imaginatively and critically as possible, in articles, stories, poems and images. The editors for this special issue are Himani Bannerji, Ioan Davies and Ato Sekyere-Otu. Please submit material by June 1, 1994 to the *Border/Lines* editorial office. Please feel free to contact us at 416-360-5249.

Guidelines for contributors

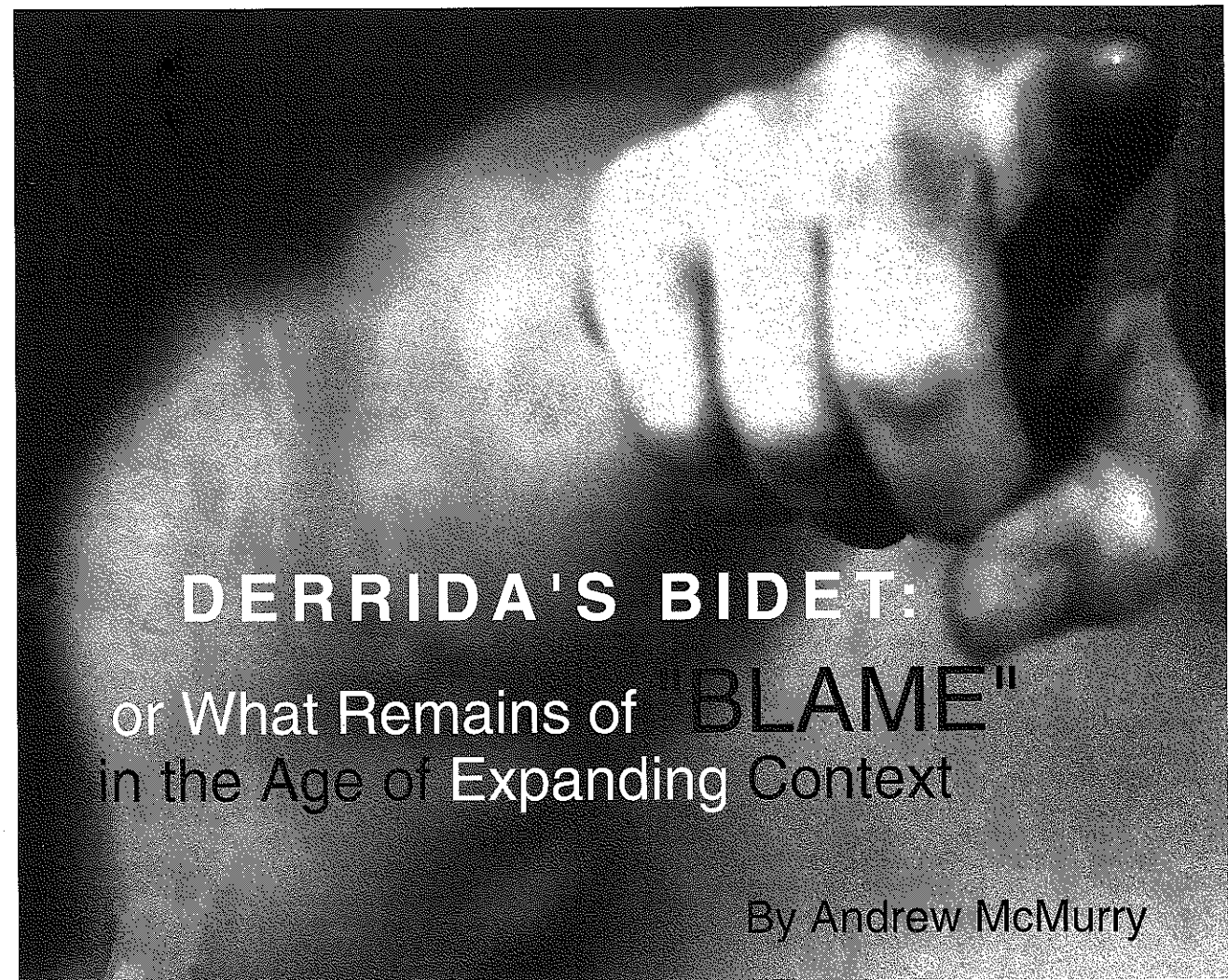
Border/Lines is an interdisciplinary magazine committed to exploring all aspects of culture—including popular culture, fine arts, visual arts, gender, literature, multi-culturalism, mass communications and political culture. Although its geographic focus is Canada, this is taken as meaning anything that is relevant to understanding Canadian culture.

Border/Lines aims to fill the gap between academic journals and specialist cultural magazines. Our audience is diverse and eclectic; so too are our contributors, drawn from a broad base of writers, cultural producers and animators. Potential contributors should bear this diversity in mind, and try to address cultural issues with spunk, humour and the occasional sideways glance. For example, we would hope that theoretical debates would be opened up to the intelligent, but non-initiated reader.

Border/Lines also publishes the *Rampike Literary Supplement* (2X a year) which features innovative art, poetry, fiction and "unclassified genres." Submissions should be addressed to Karl Jirgens.

We welcome new writers. Manuscripts should be sent to our editorial address. All correspondence should be accompanied by a self-addressed and stamped return envelope. If your manuscript is on disc please send us the disc (MAC format is preferred).

Visuals: Writers are encouraged to send illustrative work with their manuscript. Visual artists are encouraged to submit work. Please carefully consider the reproductive qualities of your submissions, as well as the page proportions of the magazine. Captions, photo credits and return address should be included. Final design decisions rest with the collective.



DERRIDA'S BIDET: or What Remains of "BLAME" in the Age of Expanding Context

By Andrew McMurry

Spill Doctors?

Captain Hazelwood had put back a few beers, so naturally he thought he'd have a little lie-down. The ship had made this passage many times, and with Alfred E. Newmanian confidence, Cappy took to his bunk.

The rest is history, or what passes for it. When the oil settled, Hazelwood had taken some heat, EXXON had acted suitably remorseful, the sea-otters in Prince William Sound had died of hypothermia. Rocks were subsequently scrubbed. Valuable lessons about arctic oil spill dynamics were learned, America's dangerous dependence on oil was highlighted, and the gross-national product went up as a result of the money shelled out for "clean-up."

In the Age of Expanding Context, however, things can never be entirely cleaned up. True, the waves, the

wind and the slickered, hose-wielding personnel dispersed the crude, busted up the floating puddle of oil as in a shaken jar of salad dressing: they made it go away. And in the same manner, the emotions the collective "we" felt about EXXON, Hazelwood or our own dirty little oil habit would be dispersed by the winds of an oil imbroglio in another Gulf, the thunderous breaking of the communist wave, the Blue Jays winning a pennant, etc. But a lingering sense of dread remained that the EXXON *Valdez* grounding symbolized more than cavalier treatment of the natural environment. Just as the toxic oil residues in the Alaskan ocean sediments wait to precipitate a slower, deadlier crisis, so do the event's symbolic effluvia taint the cultural domain by some vague, submerged process.

As pictures of oily birds shivering in the Arctic wilderness were juxtaposed with oily EXXON officials brazenly attempting media spin control, an angry public cried out for accountability. *Who was at fault? What fiends were behind this?* Yet the anger gradually sput-

tered and subsided into mere undirected frustration when it became more and more clear there was to be no one to blame at all.

And this remains perhaps the most haunting revelation to emerge from the EXXON Valdez disaster: there is no longer anyone to blame for such events because their contexts, like the events themselves, have become too complex to define, let alone control. The contexts in which events occur have become illimitable—resulting in *decontextualization*, a condition wherein blame finds its rest point nowhere and everywhere. To put it simply, those who appear most directly negligent are merely iconic of the greater negligence of our entire planetary culture. In effect, we must all share in the blame, for no one is really blameworthy at all. Blame, like so much else, is going global, and rendering the localized conditions under which responsibility was normally assumed, quite simply, irrelevant. The conclusion: "Blame" becomes a noun without referent.

In Defense of Slick Willie

It has become a truism that we no longer live in a Newtonian universe, where effects were linked explicitly with causes and could be sorted, theoretically, with a certain degree of confidence. Major events still happen—disasters, assassinations, political and social scandals, environmental catastrophes, wars—but causes and effects appear as intensities, pulsations, waves and radiation: they do not coalesce into discrete, identifiable elements.

"Taking responsibility" may once have entailed a reluctant embrace of such discrete elements, like a ship loading a dangerous cargo. But perversely, in its death throes responsibility has become a quantity that, like water, seeks its own level; it settles on those who don't have the wherewithal to deflect it further along the networks of power. The blame game becomes structurally identical to musical chairs, and those with the slowest reaction time lose, punished for the perniciousness of the game itself.

The growing zeitgeist of unaccountability finds expression in Homer Simpson's aphoristic "I'm not to blame;" it is encoded in the techno-establishment's centrifugal apologetics for absolute failure, most famously in the agentless phrase "mistakes were made." Gone now is the bold MacArthuresque "I shall return;" instead we have bland Bushisms, such as "I was out of the loop." The motto of the

politicians of this unheroic age is not Truman's "The buck stops here" but rather a non-committal "Shit happens."

Well indeed it does, as it always has. Politicians have never wanted to face the music, yet never has it been so disconcertingly clear that they really shouldn't have to. A case in point: Americans continue to focus their anger at the president, the one figure who above all others must take responsibility. They think themselves cheated, however, when each president seems slicker and less substantial than the last. Such aggrievedness is absurd. Executive responsibility and the gravitas that accompanies are shed proportionately with the attenuation of the power of the presidency, which reaches new lows with each passing year. The metaphor of the "ship of state" with president as "captain" should be scuttled. Clinton, for all that has been laid at his feet like a bag of garbage, has been able at this point to do precisely nothing: the major issues confronting him—"Bosnia," "the deficit," "gays in the military"—are all impossible contexts into which he has plummeted, like a balloonist set down on a nude beach.

He can do little but keep his gaze high and pretend he meant to land there. When all is said and done, however, capricious weather, bad charts, a loss of hot air, and so on, brought him hither. His actual control over the "winds of change" is minimal, and for the electorate to blame him for his failures by one-terming him would be mere petulance. And elections—supposedly the ultimate determinations of executive responsibility—are simply referenda on advertising campaigns anyway.

So despite the charges of cowardice, butt-saving, and amorality levied at those who resist or shift the assumption of responsibility, the types of deferrals, disownings, and delinkages described here are not necessarily *bad* or *wrong*. On the contrary, the refusal to be held accountable and the concomitant de-shouldering of responsibility are theoretically defensible positions, and indeed obey an inexorable logic. Words like *accountability*, *responsibility*, *liability* and *blame* no longer work. Their catachresis is an adducible correlation of a number of trends of modernity: the revelations of sciences such as ecology and physics; the structural logic of late-capitalism; the erosion of the "subject" as the central locus of thought and action; and the rise of the signifier and the disappearance of transcendent reference points.

Ecology

John Muir said, "when we try to pick out something, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe." "Everything is connected to everything else": so says a New Age maxim. "Interconnectedness" [sic] has become the new buzz-word in every field from computer science to environmental spirituality. Paradigmatically, a billiard-ball universe is junked in favor of the mushiness of relativity, particle/wave dualities, strange attractors.

In biological terms, the "food chain" has been replaced by the "food web." A food chain was a barely ecological notion, but it did allow some recognition of the important links between components of a particular ecosystem. In a food chain, energy passes linearly through the links in the system and any break in the chain could spell disaster for all components. A hypothetical example: the fox ate the mice ate the grasshopper ate the grain; all those higher up in the chain suffered when the wheat crop was destroyed by wheat rust.

Now, by contrast, in the food web model the energy fluxes associated with ecological change arise and disperse multidirectionally, often without easily discernable origins or ends. A number of events occur when the wheat rust enters the area: grasshoppers migrate to better feeding grounds; mouse population declines; rabbit population increases; hawks benefit from the rabbit explosion; snakes increase as hawks switch to preferred food; the wheat field is returned to fallow allowing recrudescence of native plants; foxes go hungry and their litters are smaller; and so on, in uncounted directions. Although the wheat rust appears to be the identifiable catalyst of change in both cases, only the web model illustrates adequately the ramifying, resonating, cybernetic nature of ecological revolution. On the other hand, the determination of cause and effect becomes more troublesome in the food web model. As in the food chain model, we might try to "blame" the wheat rust for the fox decline, but it is not clear that the rust initiated the decline, nor even that a fox decline is necessarily a bad thing. It may instead be a restoration of a previous balance. Other species have increased. And we should not forget that the wheat is an introduced plant to begin with, and thus the pre-rust balance was itself artificial.

The very sophistication of the ecological paradigm thus results in a more sophisticated and nuanced ver-

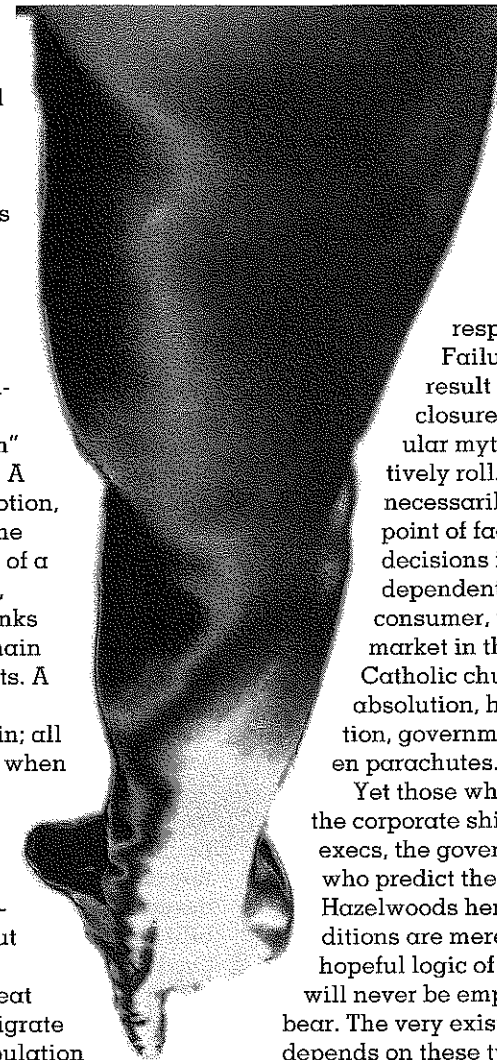
sion of reality. In terms of our discussion, context makes possible blame, but it is context itself that is now in question. "Your wheat field is responsible for the raid on my hen-house" becomes a tough charge to make stick.

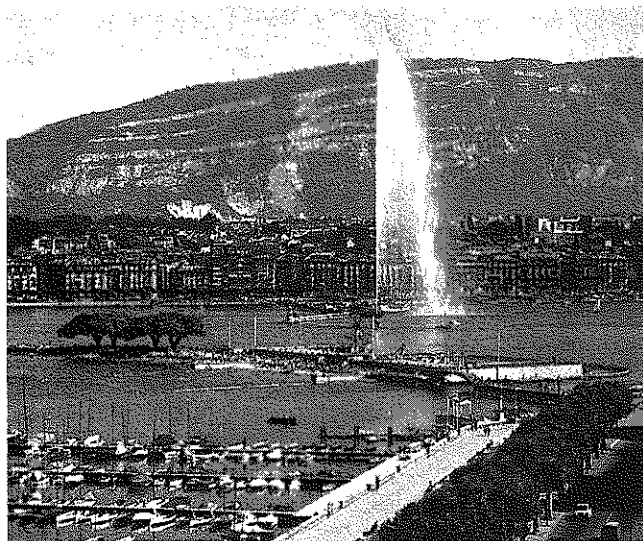
Economy

In business, decisions are made in response to changing market conditions. Failure to understand the market can result in bankruptcy, loss of profits, plant closure. When a bad decision is made, popular mythology has it that heads will figuratively roll. But even in business pain does not necessarily inhere in the primary parties. In point of fact, the real hurt stemming from bad decisions is shifted to workers, communities, dependent industries, or more generally, the consumer, whose choices *en masse* shaped the market in the first place. The system, like the Catholic church, is rigged to provide sinners absolution, here in the form of Chapter 11 protection, government bailouts, tax write-offs, and golden parachutes.

Yet those whose blunders most immediately put the corporate ship on the rocks—the shareholders, the execs, the government bureaucracies, the economists who predict the market trends—are the Captain Hazelwoods here; for their responses to market conditions are merely programmatic, and follow the hopeful logic of the alcoholic who believes the bottle will never be empty nor the hangover too painful to bear. The very existence of capitalist economies depends on these two linked idealities of inexhaustible resources and insatiable consumption. If there is a problem with those assumptions, how can the people whose livelihoods must presuppose their correctness be blamed? Thus, in economic terms, responsibility is automatically ceded to the market. It is the market that ultimately must take responsibility for the messes it creates. Yet what is the market? It is the perfect scapegoat, since it is composed of everyone and everything and therefore appears an impersonal, inescapable force, like the weather. (And even in the confused aftermath of a hurricane or flood, "I blame the weather" is perhaps the most vacuous statement one could make.)

Let us consider the situation in more detail. Liberals decry the conventional wisdom that the S&L frauds and other related financial debacles are attributable to an amorphous "greedy 80s culture"—which thereby implicates everyone who lived through the decade equally instead of those most directly involved. Yet even "those most directly involved"—Reagan, Neil Bush, congress, Wall Street, land developers, speculators—have attained in some parts the status of tragic heroes, and





rightly so, for their ability to profit was sanctioned by a complicitous public long enamoured with the possibility of unlimited wealth creation.

So the failure to alchemize silk purses from sows' ears does not mean therefore that the magic doesn't exist, but that fallible magicians botched their spells. Mistakes were made. Americans have internalized the rules of the capitalist shell-game, and they believe that anyone and everyone can attain the status of millionaires. Unlike in the Philippines, the American Marcoses receive social sanction for their accumulations. If they "work hard and play by the rules," the sky's the limit; and if they appear to have gone astray, it is ultimately because the system didn't correct their excesses, the system is at fault, the system must be adjusted, perhaps capital gains taxes should be lowered. But the system is us. In a crypto-Calvinist context like this, how can any one individual be damned for greediness?

Thus, culpability for the tremendously expensive S&L bailout is dispersed outward from Washington and urban financial zones into the hinterlands, even to future generations. Pious commands to "stop the finger-pointing" and "take the medicine" resound; "belt-tightening" becomes the clarion-call; "we" must "share the burden" say the Wall Street clergy—i.e., we must all share in the atonement for the sin. In the understandable but theoretically indefensible resistance to this kind of group flagellation, small wonder that a Texas tycoon made rich at the public trough can act as a born-again populist messiah for the presumptuously guiltless Great Unwashed.

Responsibility for the EXXON Valdez disaster is similarly and correctly devolved onto the head of an energy-hungry everyman. It is his collective fault that eco-insensitive pipelines must be built, that wars must be fought to provide him with oil; for in the age of expanding context the producers and purveyors of oil and their apologists and benefactors in governments act solely in the service of the all-powerful consumer. Democracy of

the wallet. The collapse of the nuclear power industry, the clean-up of toxic waste, the retraining of primary industry workers: all of the social and economic costs incurred to repair these spectacular failures of the industrial mentality—instances where people suffer for being in the wrong place at the wrong time—might be viewed alternatively not as the price of progress but as part of a national strategy to expiate sin through the dilution of blame. Shit happens, and in the absence of isolable guilty parties we must all take the fall.

Subjectivity

And this is now the diffused condition of blame in our webbed culture. Bad things still happen to good people, but it is useless to try to determine beyond all doubt who should be hung. Felony, capital crime, rape should be easy to define; yet even when murder most foul is caught out, the murderer is almost by definition insane, or at least exhibiting the conditioned responses of bad childhood and negative environment. Criminal psychologists argue convincingly that offenders are simply the inevitable products of an unforgiving classist, racist, sexist society. Society is a total system from which the criminal's motivation (or lack of it) only appears to arise spontaneously. Society therefore must be held ultimately responsible for its criminal excrescences.

Of course we still maintain codes and standards by which to adjudicate responsibility, and there is no question the law does pronounce guilt and innocence. All of this anachronistic legal inertia does much to assuage the societal conscience but little to halt the unassignability of blame, as most forward-thinking jurists realize. On the other hand, part of the conservative right's agenda is to damn the liberal penchant to place blame squarely on all but the accused. Yet the right's nostalgia for stocks and gallows only reminds us of the theoretical poverty of their position. Far from building more prisons and increasing executions, we ought to call for a therapized future in which malefactors are seen and medically treated for what they are: burst pustules on a filthy body politic.

Textuality

A final theoretical matrix for this phenomenon of unaccountability draws upon the post-structuralist dictum that "il n'y a pas d'hors texte" (which Jacques Derrida says is the same as saying "there is nothing outside of context"). This means, in effect, that every spice in the kitchen went into the soup. There is no simple way to isolate the taste since the melange depends for its flavour on each component. You may say it is too salty, but you thereby ignore the extent to which pepper informs it, and you certainly have minimized the complexity added by the pinch of dill. Have another spoonful before you pass judgment on the recipe. And then another. And still another.

This expanding contextualization presumably would

be halted by some sort of reasonable "reining-in." In mere gourmanderie it is (e.g. "But I don't like it!"). Elsewhere, however, the reining-in becomes progressively more difficult because the expansion is governed by the postmodern flight of meaning itself. In what context, so the logic goes, is the delineation of context to be made? When and where do we decide to interrupt the ripple-effect of dilating frames of reference, and in whose name? With the Valdez, the sequential blaming of Hazelwood-EXXON-oil demand at first seems governed by a mechanistic penchant for first causes; but when blame cannot find a clear focus, it will not settle on anyone at all, and the very notion of responsibility, unlike heavy crude, evaporates. Culpability is ceded then to the too many actors, to the techno-socio-historical conditions, to the nature of reality itself. Even EXXON can credibly appeal for exoneration, as it recently has, because the initial settlement merely proved that, given the legal climate, culpability follows the money.

Whither Blame?

So what can we expect when it becomes theoretically incorrect to say "mea culpa"? As has been suggested, one highlight will be the growing reactionary consensus for punishment of the body as if in sacrificial retaliation for the flight of sin. A return to Foucault's favorite century seems in the offing, when the brutalized flesh paid for the weakness of the spirit. Only this time, the body is mere scapegoat: electrocuted, gassed, injected, testicles removed—in ritual response to the social palate's nostalgic taste for blame. (This is all presaged by the cinema, where excessive violence against bad guys is deemed morally instructive—whence the general tolerance, for example, of Clint Eastwood revenge flicks.) We will soon see the day when young ghetto-felons are tried as "drug-pins," sent to the chair for passing cocaine through the narcotics pipelines of South Chicago, East L.A., as well as upper Manhattan and the Hamptons. As the most visible manifestation of the U.S. drug culture, such youths will be bled to pay for the sins of an entire nation hooked on various forms of escapism.

We can also predict that blame, despite its practical disappearance, will continue to be theorized. Derrida, for example, knows better than anyone that the text-view of the world creates linkages between wildly disparate elements, heaps context on context, and makes meaning—read "blaming"—undecidable. But to him, this does not mean that blame cannot be pronounced, only that the attempt to fix blame is always political, i.e., that blame can arise only in a context and entails certain responsibilities for the blamer.

One useful tactic, then, for those who wish to avoid being targets of blame in our incipient reactionary culture will be to recontextualize blame so that it instead adheres to those who persist in blaming. People who blame generally do so according to principles they think

are actually beyond praise and blame. But, mutatis mutandis, such folk themselves become vulnerable to blame because blaming is in essence a totalitarian act. A blamer wishes to shut down the play of signification and the consideration of other contexts. Also, and significantly, to cry "J'accuse" is to distance oneself from the structure of responsibility: by blaming others one attempts to exempt oneself from blame.

On the contrary, one should attempt to be so responsible to the contexts of "responsibility" that one may risk appearing irresponsible. For example, when Derrida considers the Paul de Man affair, to those who accuse the latter of never taking responsibility for his anti-semitic wartime writings and the former of irresponsibility in defending him, Derrida can say that those who are most irresponsible are the critics who will not do the work of deconstructive reading, who do not read de Man—and Derrida himself—with enough attentiveness. These critics, say Derrida, without sufficient rigour or self-consciousness, seek to assert blame in the most totalitarian manner, to bring the discussion to rest without probing the limits of de Man's discourse—as well as the limits of language itself and their own necessary implication therein. In effect, they do not wish to be fully responsible for their charges of irresponsibility.

Derrida, on the other hand, the defender of the accused, cannot be considered irresponsible because he keeps open the possibility of mitigating contexts. He wishes to trace down every linguistic lead, tease apart every abstraction, place de Man's words in context after context. To some this seems like obfuscation, post-structuralist bullshit. But at bottom, Derrida remains untouched by the apparent odiousness of his defense because by multiplying contexts for de Man's obviously execrable writings Derrida simultaneously purifies his own discourse—by demonstrating time and again the impossibility of reading and thus of making blame stick. And by castigating his critics' unwillingness to consider the implications of their own accusations, Derrida is able to shift the charge of irresponsibility to them. As the old joke goes, the bear asks the rabbit if shit sticks to his fur; the answer being no, the bear wipes himself with the rabbit.

To conclude, then, it seems that when the concept of "blame" at last reaches the end of its tether and vanishes into the ether of non sequitur, the most "responsible" thing to do will be to speak up vociferously for the negative responsibility of others—and pray that when the time comes they'll do the same for you. This way everyone's ass will stay clean.

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